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Thesis

REALISM AND IDEALISM IN THE HEROINES OF GEORGE MEREDITH

Submitted by

Gladys Stetson

(A.B., Bates, 1919)

In partial fulfillment of requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

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REALISM AND IDEALISM IN THE HEROINES OF GEORGE MEREDITH

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- I Introduction--Meredith a painter and champion of womanhood.
- II The problem of plausibility arises in Meredith's characterization of his women.
  - A Meredith's aims as shown in his letters which define his opinions on idealism and realism.
  - B Idealism and realism not incompatible.
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- III Particular criticism and discussion of the heroines of George Meredith in considerable detail.
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E Rhoda Fleming

1 Dahlia Fleming

2 Rhoda Fleming

F The Adventure of Harry Richmond

1 Ottilia

2 Janet Ilchester

G Beauchamp's Career

1 Renee

2 Cecilia Halkett

3 Jenny Denham

H The Egoist

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I The Tragic Comedians

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1 Diana

K One of Our Conquerors

1 Nataly Radnor

2 Nesta Radnor

L Lord Ormont and His Aminta

1 Aminta

M The Amazing Marriage

1 Carinthia

IV Meredith's marital experiences viewed in relation  
to his work.



1. The first thing I noticed  
when I stepped out of the plane  
was the fresh air.

2. The second thing I noticed  
was the beautiful view of the city.

3. The third thing I noticed  
was the friendly people.

4. The fourth thing I noticed  
was the delicious food.

5. The fifth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful weather.

6. The sixth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful architecture.

7. The seventh thing I noticed  
was the beautiful parks.

8. The eighth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful museums.

9. The ninth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful shopping.

10. The tenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful nightlife.

11. The eleventh thing I noticed  
was the beautiful beaches.

12. The twelfth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful mountains.

13. The thirteenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful lakes.

14. The fourteenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful forests.

15. The fifteenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful islands.

16. The sixteenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful castles.

17. The seventeenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful gardens.

18. The eighteenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful bridges.

19. The nineteenth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful streets.

20. The twentieth thing I noticed  
was the beautiful people.

21. The twenty-first thing I noticed  
was the beautiful culture.

22. The twenty-second thing I noticed  
was the beautiful history.

23. The twenty-third thing I noticed  
was the beautiful art.



V Consideration of Meredith's heroines en masse as allies of the Comic Spirit.

VI Conclusion that Meredith is a realistic portrayer of women.



1. Description of the object of the study  
2. Statement of the problem  
3. Statement of the purpose  
4. Statement of the scope  
5. Statement of the limitations

## REALISM AND IDEALISM IN THE HEROINES OF GEORGE MEREDITH

George Meredith's portraits of his heroines constitute one of the largest collections of beautiful and intelligent women in all literature. So splendid the portraiture and so charming the subjects, the suspicion arises whether Meredith in his enthusiastic championing of the sex did not exaggerate their intellectual and spiritual attributes. Of their beauty we raise no question.

Our present problem, then, is to see how plausibly portrayed these women are. Are they living creatures or are they lay-figures dressed up for the purposes of a sermon? What balance has the author struck between idealism and realism? Knowing Meredith to be a Victorian author we do not expect the stark realism of Mr. James Joyce, but if the writer possesses a keen eye and a saving sense of humor we may expect a satisfactory realism even in the absence of clinical notes. At least we may unless a certain modern school of realistic writers is entirely right and every one else entirely wrong.

An artist must be judged largely by the extent to which he fulfills his own purpose. It is fair, then, to examine at the outset what Meredith thought of idealism in fiction. He writes in a letter:

"Between realism and idealism there is no natural conflict. This completes that. Realism is the basis of good



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composition; it implies study, observation, artistic power, and (in those who can do more) humility. Little writers should be realistic. They would then at least do solid work. They afflict the world because they will attempt that which is given to none but noble workmen to achieve. A great genius must necessarily employ ideal means, for a vast conception cannot be placed bodily before the eye and remain to be suggested. Idealism is an atmosphere whose effects of grandeur are wrought out through a series of illusions that are illusions to the sense within us only when divorced from the groundwork of the real.....For my part I live and cling to earth, as the one piece of God's handiwork which we possess. I admit that we can refashion, but of earth must be the material."\*

And in another letter:

"I think that all right use of life, and the one secret of life is to pave ways for <sup>the</sup> firmer footing of those who succeed us; and as to my works, I know them faulty, think them of worth only where they point and aid to that end. Close knowledge of our fellows, discernment of the law of existence, these lead to our great civilization. I have supposed that the novel exposing and illustrating the natural history of man may help us to such sustaining roadside gifts."\*\*

\* The Letters of George Meredith To Rev. Augustus Jessop  
Vol. I P. 156

\*\* The Letters of George Meredith To G. P. Baker Vol. II P. 398





Thus Meredith asserts that realism and idealism are not incompatible; in fact that they suppl<sup>e</sup>ment each other; that realism as a groundwork and idealism as an atmosphere combine to work out the effects of great art.

At the same time, however, that Meredith declares himself a realist, we must remember that the realism of Meredith will be quite different from the realism of such an author as Zola. Details as such do not interest him; it is only when they aid the characterization that they are emphasized.

On this point we may quote Diana Warwick--herself a successful authoress--who says:

"I wonder whether the world is as bad as a certain class of writers tell us! The world imagines those to be at our natures' depths who are impudent enough to expose its muddy shallows."\*

And last, not to exceed the sweet reasonableness of quotation, Meredith has one of his characters say in "One of Our Conquerors":

"He knows the world from having sifted and sorted a lot of our dust-bins; as the modern realists imagine it's an exposition of positive human nature when they've pulled down our noses to the worst parts."\*\*

Evidently we have to expect from our author such a realism as implies observation and careful study of char-

\* "Diana of the Crossways" P. 231

\*\* "One of Our Conquerors" P. 105





acter without emphasis of sordid detail.

However, in spite of Meredith's statement that he "clings to earth", there are those who consider that his heroines possess more intelligence and often more nobility than are vouchsafed most women. We will try to show by examination of each female character that, while Meredith has undoubtedly nearly always chosen to picture good women and intelligent women, ~~that~~ their characters are neither impossible or fantastically unreal--~~that~~ they think and act as real women think and act.

Now let us turn briefly from a consideration of method to one of purpose. In his novels we commonly see Meredith preoccupied with woman's position in a man-made world. Thus it is that in her relations with men and in her reactions to their treatment of her she is most carefully portrayed.

Joubert's dismal pronouncement: "La haine entre les deux sexes ne s'eteint guere" should be illumined on the study wall of him who would study Meredith's women. Not that Meredith was a woman-hater; on the contrary he showed the most delicate sympathy for women and the most imaginative insight into their characters. He was not content with mere understanding--he wanted more freedom, more justice for women. Let him speak for himself in a letter to H. W. Strong:

"Since I began to reflect I have been oppressed by



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the injustice done to women, the constraint put upon their natural aptitudes and their faculties, generally much to the degradation of the race. I have not studied them more closely than I have men, but with more affection, a deeper interest in their enfranchisement and development, being assured that women of the independent mind are needed for any sensible degree of progress. They will so educate their daughters that these will not be instructed at the start to think themselves inferior to men because less muscular, and need not have recourse to particular arts, feline chiefly, to make their way in the world...."\*

Meredith saw that sentimentality and masculine egoism wrought evil for women. He saw that there was a war of the sexes, or at least where there was no war, it was because woman was content with her vassalage and from weakness or dispirit would not carry the battle to the enemy and wrest a victory from him. Meredith sought to endow woman with a larger life; to claim for her qualities that are not peculiar to her; to prove, above all, that she is not dominated by sex, but is as individual as man. To this end he devoted his art.

But let none entering for the first time on an exploration of the novels of George Meredith suppose that he is about to encounter a pamphleteer. There will be found no tub-thumping, no platforms, no ranging of statistics. Meredith's appeal is from the point of view of a broad

\* "The Letters of George Meredith" Vol. II P. 562





humanity. As Le Gallienne says in his brilliant book, "George Meredith: Some Characteristics": "Diana and her sister queens would hardly have won us had they been pamphlets in petticoats. No, it is by their womanhood alone, in Mr. Meredith's art, as in that of any other who has won like success, that they rule over us."\* It is true that Meredith was an advocate of what are, or were, the rights of women. This was to be expected of a man of his pronounced radical tendencies in politics; but his polemics were left to letters to women's Liberal Associations, or to newspaper interviews. In such instances where didacticism creeps in it is through the mouthpiece of a character and does not injure the novelist's art.

Most of Meredith's heroines struggle against some form of masculine tyranny. In "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" we have the story of Lucy's submission to Sir Austin's scheme of educating his son. Emilia in "Sandra Belloni" is a victim of Wilfred's sentimental egoism. In "Rhoda Fleming" Dahlia is incapable of combatting the treachery and coldness of Edward Blancove. Her sister Rhoda, acting with extraordinary stubbornness and moral force, springs to the defense, and succeeds in blindly injuring her sister. In "Beauchamp's Career" Renee is caught in the web of the traditional French marriage of convenience and Cecilia Halkett is driven by Nevil Beauchamp's vacillation into a union with the prosaic Blackburn Tuckham. In "The Egoist"

\* Le Gallienne, "George Meredith: Some Characteristics" P. 82





Clara Middleton battles with Willoughby's sensual identification of ignorance and innocence in women; a secondary character, Laetitia Dale, suffers with her at the hands of the egocentric Sir Willoughby. "Diana of the Crossways" gives the very cream of Meredith's views on marriage. English law and convention forces Diana to take an anomalous and unhappy position before the world. In "One of Our Conquerors" is presented the contest of the Radnor household with convention, since Radnor's legal wife will not release him. "Lord Ormont and His Aminta" tells of the struggle of a young girl, married abroad to a military gentleman, to gain acknowledgement of her position as his wife. "The Amazing Marriage" is devoted to the brutal treatment of Carinthia at the hands of her husband, Lord Fleetwood. In the other novels the problems, while not primarily of this nature, are complicated by similar difficulties between the sexes.

"The Ordeal of Richard Feverel", published in 1859, is Meredith's first novel, if we except "The Shaving of Shagpat" which is an extravaganza in both thought and form, and in which we need only to note that the author shows Man largely dependent upon Woman for inspiration and guidance to save himself from complete ruin.

Some critics have considered Lucy Desborough of "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" as a creature of more conventional drawing than of individual character. We cannot deny some validity to this classification but it does not





quite do justice to Lucy. Grant in general that Lucy is the familiar delicate beauty of fiction (the book is itself of all the novels of Meredith the most conventional) we still cannot dismiss her if her loveliness clings to us when much of the book is forgotten. In this book we feel that Meredith reached the heights of poetical fervor and the result is so exquisite in spots that we remember Lucy, for example, when we can find nothing in her character to debate. In the early love scenes between Richard and Lucy, Meredith so mingles the lovers with earth and sky in spontaneous artistic expression that we never can forget the result:

"The tide of color has ebbed from the upper sky. In the west the sea of sunken fire draws back; and the stars leap forth, and tremble, and retire before the advancing moon, who slips the silver train of cloud from her shoulders, and, with her foot on the pine-tops, surveys heaven. 'Lucy, did you never dream of meeting me?' 'O Richard! yes; for I remembered you.' 'Lucy, and did you pray that we might meet?' 'I did!' Young as when she looked upon the lovers in Paradise, the fair Immortal journeys onward. Fronting her, it is not night but veiled day. Full half the sky is flushed. Not darkness; not day; but the nuptials of the two. 'My own! my own forever! You are pledged to me? Whisper!' He hears the delicious music. 'And you are mine?' A soft beam travels to the fern-covert under the pine-wood where they sit, and for answer he





has her eyes, turned to him an instant, timidly flitting over the depths of his, and downcast; for through her eyes her soul is naked to him. 'Lucy! my bride! my life!' The night-jar spins his dark monotony on the branch of the pine. The soft beam travels round them and listens to their hearts."\*

From a lovely young girl, little more than the recipient of Richard's impassioned love-vows in a scene like this, Lucy grows in the school of life until she has strength to meet with firmness of resolve the circumstances of Richard's contrite return:

"'But you love me? Richard! My husband! you love me?' 'Yes, I have never loved, I shall never love, woman but you.' 'Darling, ~~kiss~~ kiss me!' she said. He did not join lips. 'I have come to ask your forgiveness.' 'Can you forgive man so base?' 'But you love me, Richard?' 'Yes, I can say that before God. I love you and I have betrayed you, and am unworthy of you, not worthy to touch your hand, to kneel at your feet, to breathe the same air with you.' Her eyes shone brilliantly. 'You love me! you love me! darling.' And as one who has sailed through dark fears into daylight, she said, 'My husband! my darling! you will never leave me? We shall never be parted again?'"\*\*

As Henderson says, these events belong on a level where there is no place for language that is not inspired.\*\*\*

\* "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" P. 126.

\*\* "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" P. 450.

\*\*\* Henderson, M. Sturge P. 47





Lucy has suffered torments during Richard's absence; she has feared the worst and he has now confirmed her suspicions. Her arms outstretched to receive her husband are symbolic of the forgiveness with which women have ever awaited the return of men "grown weary of much laughter". Selfishness? Probably, but can we censure a forgiveness prompted by love? And should we consider Lucy more human if she had cast aside all hope of her earthly happiness and denied Richard her pardon for his sin? Here Lucy unquestionably shows the fortitude and strength of a splendid womanhood, the growth and development of which have been logically presented in the preceding pages.

Mrs. Berry, one of the minor characters, is one of the most delightful old souls who ever lived, for live she does, and she has learned something in her lifetime of the vagaries and weaknesses of Man. She is according to Meredith "a bunch of black satin" from whose lips frequently fall gems of common sense and wordly wisdom, for she is talkative. When she tries, like the sturdy, chugging, little tug-boat of a woman that she is, to bring Richard and Lucy into line, we feel her judgment is of the soundest, as we have suspected ever since she expounded her understanding of the uses of cookery.

"Evan Harrington" published in 1860 is somewhat autobiographical. In this novel Meredith has given his major concern to his minor characters. Rose Jocelyn, the heroine, is little more than the conventional young lady of fiction,





and to some Evan himself will always seem a bit priggish; he may even be forgotten as a character. But who will ever forget that imposing rank of eccentrics: the Countess de Saldar, Tom Raikes, and the Cogglesby brothers?

In treating Rose, Meredith is more concerned with showing her beauty and charm and in investing her with poetical glamor than he is in giving her definite individuality. Rose is as commonplace --- at least viewed against the gallery of Meredithian portraits --- as is her action in goading Evan into the race with his rival in which he meets with an accident. Her loyalty to Evan shows her resolution and marks her a type of steadfastness, albeit a rather usual one.

Although we may carry away no vivid picture of Rose Jocelyn, there is one woman who will permit no such light regard. This is Evan's resourceful sister, the Countess de Saldar. Louisa has inherited her father's ambition to shine in high society and becomes a woman with a single purpose. Nor is she content to shine alone but schemes to carry her family with her to social prominence. Despite rebuffs and lack of cooperation on the part of her mother and finally Evan, she conducts her campaign with a shrewdness and courage with which we cannot, to save ourselves, fail to sympathize. She has the energy and skill which is deserving of a greater degree of success than what she finally attains; for beneath the





surface "somewhere in her there's a woman if you know the way to find her". Meredith knew the way if the contrast between his treatment of her and his depiction of Lady Wathin in "Diana of the Crossways" means anything.

Lady Jocelyn, Rose's mother is one of Meredith's intelligent women, whose intelligence sits most naturally upon her. She has a masculine outlook on life; she is undemonstrative and free from passion. Her attitude toward her daughter's love affair shows an unusual amount of common sense; and when this common sense is baffled, as it was upon the occasion of Evan's "confession" of guilt in the matter of the <sup>MOUS</sup>anonym<sup>ous</sup> letter, her heart is unerring. She treats Evan generously while her intellect reasons him guilty, and when he shows his gratitude, "she was human enough to like to be appreciated," saying "Don't forget that you have a friend here."\* Evan always trusted her and relied upon her fairness. Even toward the Countess, Lady Jocelyn is kindly and tolerant. In short, she is a woman of good breeding who is broad-minded and kind,--a combination perhaps too seldom found, but a splendid example of this type of woman.

Emilia, the heroine of "Sandra Belloni", originally published as "Emilia in England", is a character about which there may be some debate. To Henderson and Arthur Symonds Emilia is perhaps the greatest of Meredith's hero-

\* Evan Harrington P. 371.





ines. Henderson writes:

"In Emilia, Meredith has given us his greatest of soul. Close to nature, elemental--a force rather than a character--to give a picture of Emilia in any way would be to rewrite her story; she can only be revealed in her effect upon others. In touch with poetry and passion at their sources, she will only make them consciously her own and realize their interplay upon life, when she has seen herself in isolation from them. Her difficulties are the opposites of Wilfred's, by whom the loyalty and oneness of feeling which are hers by nature are to be acquired only through much pain and sacrifice; power of soul, <sup>?</sup> ~~and soul~~, and the capacity to concentrate the whole of her physical and mental vigor upon a single emotion, are Emilia's from the first. She has the first essential of artistic achievement, whole-heartedness. She knows nothing of dallying rivulets or sheltered harbors; she sails in mid-stream in the hour of stress as well as in the hour of triumph. Her force is expansive, but has she the power of vision to control it? The question as Meredith sees it, is--will she employ her merely feminine or mercantile advantages, trade on her appearance, or will she determine to be valuable in her own eyes, model herself from within outwards? It is answered in Tracy Runningbrook's letters to Wilfred after her illness, in which Emilia is described as perceiving herself,



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...the first of these is the fact that the...  
...the second is the fact that the...  
...the third is the fact that the...  
...the fourth is the fact that the...  
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and even her power of love, as materials to be moulded to beauty, instruments to be tuned and harmonized."\*

Emilia seems the most highly idealized of all Meredith's women. She is so constantly forgetful of selfish ends in ordering her own life, and so unaware of the existence of duplicity among those she loves that she does approach the sublime. Only after Wilfred's selfishness has been repeatedly demonstrated does Emilia awaken to the real situation. Then she acts.

One incident near the end of the book shows Sandra's spirit and marks her as a person of character. She forces Lady Chillingworth to hear Wilfred's denial of interest in her, even as Emilia, herself had been forced to hear it, and Lady Chillingworth with good sportmanship says: "I like a hand that can deal a good stroke. I conceived you to be a mere romantic little person and I correct my mistake."\*\* There is a great deal of truth in what the Lady says. Emilia had been growing more thoughtful and less impulsive for some time since her unhappy experience with Wilfred, and this close prepares the reader for a more serious consideration of her character in the sequel to this novel, "Vittoria."

The Pole sisters, while not heroines--except possibly in their own esteem--rank with the Countess de Saldar of "Evan Harrington" as some of the most amusing and human of Meredith's women. These ladies are Wilfred's sisters \*\* "Sandra Belloni" P. 452.

\* Henderson, M. Sturge P. 83





and share his "sentimentality" to a ridiculous degree. Meredith writes of them: "To be brief they were very ambitious damsels aiming at they knew not exactly what, save that it was something so wide that it had not a name, and so high in air that no one could see it."\* The sisters, Arabella, Cornelia, and Adela--Pole, Polar, and North Pole --designations of the three shades of distance which they could convey in a bow--were not above association with those whom they scarce considered their social equals but through whom their fortunes might be advanced. It was thus that they came to concern themselves with Emilia, hoping to shine as her patronesses. Hypocritical to such an extent that they succeeded in deceiving themselves, they may awaken in many breasts painful recollections of false pride, unconscious self-justification, and sentimental rationalizing.

In 1867 "Vittoria", a continuation of the story of Emilia, appeared. Emilia has been studying music in Italy for the past three years and is dominated by a desire to help her country in a revolt against Austrian rule. In this book Emilia, or Vittoria as she now calls herself, loses some of her individuality, for patriotic fervor consumes her, dwarfing other motives and emotions. Even the great love of her life is so bound up with her country's interests that she can give herself up completely to

\* "Sandra Belloni" P. 4.





the cause of Italy. To such heights of patriotism does she reach that she is ready to undergo martyrdom and barely escapes this end at La Scala when she sings the song which is to be a signal for the uprising of Milan. She has lost much of her girlish simplicity and some illusions --Wilfred Pole was responsible for that--but she is as straightforward and loyal as ever; in fact it is her love and loyalty for her English friends and her warning to them that brands her a traitress to the Italian cause in the eyes of the influential rebel, Barto Rizzio. She acts according to her ideas of duty and service to her countrymen, even when these run counter to the desires and commands of the man she loves. In Vittoria then we find a matured and commanding woman, who faces perils with spirit and courage and disaster with calm nobility. Such women are not common, but Vittoria's actions are consistent with her passionately sincere enthusiasm. Do we not in the case of great artists often look for excesses of enthusiasm and self-expression which we call temperament? Then, too, she is Italian by birth and we must expect emotional warmth in abundance. So, though Vittoria is an unusual character, she is assuredly not unreal.

Though Rhoda Fleming gives the title to Meredith's novel of humble people, the novel which Mr. Le Gallienne says is written in "Saxon simple as song", it is her sister's tragedy that is the supreme event. Dahlia Fleming's





character is first revealed to the reader by her letters. The first is to Edward Blancove whom she has dismissed from her window when she unexpectedly finds her sister at her lodgings. "In my bed there lay my sister, and I could not leave her, I love her so. I could not have gone downstairs after seeing her there; I had to say that cold word and shut the window."\* The second letter is written some months later to Rhoda who has returned to the farm. Dahlia says that she is leaving England that day, and continues: "I must not love you too much, for I have all my love to give to my Edward, my own now, and I am his trustingly forever. But he will let me give you some of it--and Rhoda is never jealous. She shall have a great deal. Only I am frightened when I think how immense my love is for him; so that anything--everything he thinks right is right for me."\*\*

It is evident at once that Dahlia is weak and dependent, but loving and obedient to love. Rhoda, the strong sister, has helped spoil her and the vanity of a young girl has been flattered that a man in Edward's position should love her.

Especially after her illness does Dahlia become lifeless and incapable in her stronger sister's hands. What health remains to her after her fever spends itself in mere

\* "Rhoda Fleming", P.45.

\*\* "Rhoda Fleming", P.48.





remembrance and revival of feeling; she has no excess to formulate arguments or refute them. Rhoda is given to us as a noble character, but it is hard to feel that her love for Dahlia would not have prevented her from forcing Dahlia's marriage to Sedgett. This is much more forgivable in Farmer Fleming, for his is the more conventional and masculine attitude. Here Rhoda becomes a figure of tragic remorselessness.

Mr. Garnet Smith has summed up Rhoda for us acceptably except for the difference which we have noted. He says:

"Rhoda Fleming, like Sandra, is a child of Nature, strong, very natural. Not of the 'comfortable classes', a farmer's daughter, she has thus escaped, even as Sandra, the deformation of training to cowardice. Rhoda is proffered love by strong Robert; but Rhoda is a savage, freedom-loving virgin. She has some idea, indeed, that the love of a dainty 'gentleman' would be preferable to that of a rough Robert, but her passion and pride are fixed on her weak sister, Dahlia; and Dahlia is betrayed by a 'gentleman'. It is ignorance that leads to the unhappiness of girls. 'How can girls know what men are?' she cries. She will right her sister at all hazards. Stern, bitterly strong, she achieves that which she judges to be just, rights her sister most wrongly, thwarts the repentance of her sister's lover and beloved....There is tragedy in Rhoda's





strenuousness in well-meaning error....Mr. Meredith--ardent match-maker on philosophic principles--is desirous that men and women shall be strong and passionate in love, that so they may be helpful to each other and the world; and as condition of helpfulness he posits that first they shall understand each other. The women of the comfortable classes do not understand men, he is sure, because they are educated to be ignorant; Rhoda, not of these, does not understand Robert because, wholly untutored for good or ill, she is ignorant that the strong man can help her. Robert knows that she can help him, can reclaim his passionate strength for vicious waste; Rhoda comes to know that without his help her strength runs out to error. Let them mate, and either is helpmate to the other, and their joint sagacities will hit right action in the while; the pair are serviceable to the world. Add two wasteful strengths together, and you get due economy, it would seem. Or, rather, perhaps, their added strength will be mutually corrective."\*

The character of Dahlia has been often compared with that of Richardson's Clarissa. But Dahlia's final feeling for her lover is more delicate than Clarissa's. She does not offer Christian charity and prayers for Edward; all that she has is his. Her life has been robbed of the capacity for love or joy. In Clarissa's case death is the

\* J. A. Hammerton, George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism. P. 248.





final note; the tragedy could go no farther. In Dahlia's it would have been inadequate, an evasion of the tragedy. Her story asks death in life as its end. "She lived seven years her sister's housemate, nurse of the growing swarm. She had gone through fire, as few women have done in like manner, to leave their hearts among the ashes; but with that human heart she left regrets behind her. The soul of this young creature filled its place. It shone in her eyes and inner work, a lamp in the little neighborhood; and not less a lamp of cheerful beams for one day being as another to her. When she died she relinquished nothing. Others knew the loss.\*

A defect of the book, particularly from the standpoint of our general inquiry into realism and idealism, is the talk of the sisters. In this novel Meredith abandons the fine gentry he usually writes about, but he does not abandon their language. Imagine Dahlia of the farm writing her sister thus: "Titian the painter lived here and painted ladies, who sat to him without a bit of garment on, and indeed, my darling, I often think it was more comfortable for the model than the artist. Even modesty seems too hot a covering for human creatures here."\*\*

And the oft-quoted dialogue between Rhoda and Robert:

\* "Rhoda Fleming" P. 399.

\*\* "Rhoda Fleming" P. 64.





"I've always thought you were born to be a lady." (You have that ambition, young madam).

She answered: "That's what I don't understand".  
(Your saying it, O my friend!)

"You will soon take to your new duties." (You have small objection to them now).

"Yes, or my life won't be worth much." (Know that you are driving me to it).

"And I wish you happiness, Rhoda." (You are madly imperiling the prospect thereof).\*

And more to the same effect. This is skillful,--the shadowy meaning behind the utterances, but it seems out of character. It is Meredith obtruding upon his own people.

Five years elapsed after the publication of "Vittoria", which appeared in 1865, before the appearance of "The Adventures of Harry Richmond" in 1870. In the novels published after this date appear all of Meredith's heroines whom we may term characters of intellect. Thus we note a development toward a more searching study which manifested itself in a deeper and clearer insight into the hearts and minds of womankind. Meredith's satisfaction in his domestic happiness, dating from his second marriage in 1864 may have contributed to his championing of the interests of women. At any rate the later heroines, especially Clara, Diana, Nataly, and Carinthia, receive more careful and powerful analysis.

\* "Rhoda Fleming" P. 364.





The most unusual of Meredith's novels is "The Adventures of Harry Richmond". This is a rambling, picturesque novel in autobiographical style. To some it is the master's greatest work; to others it is complex, digressive and confused. It contains two women who may be said to share the role of heroine: the Princess Ottilia and Janet Ilchester. These two women are of exactly opposite temperaments; the Princess is sentimentally inclined; Janet Ilchester is practical. Each represents a common type of woman, Mr. Henderson thinks that Ottilia would be the greatest of Meredith's heroines were the characterization of her not too elusive. He writes: "The atmosphere she breathes in is too rarified for the reader. Ottilia never formulates or expresses any decision against Harry; the barrier revealed to us between them, though less enduring than rank, is much less tangible. Not to be removed or undermined, it might have been surmounted; but a giant such as Alvan would have been needed for the task; it was ludicrously impossible for a youth whose delicacy and insight had not the ordinary Englishman's endurance to back them up."\* Ottilia seems less vividly portrayed than the author's female characters usually are: perhaps because she is seen through the eyes of Harry Richmond; perhaps because she suggests a far-away fairy princess of Romance. She has "miraculous beauty" as the author presents her first

\* Henderson, M. Sturge P. 118





as a girl of about twelve. There is no weakness in the description of her physical charms at any time, but her character is not so clearly defined. In connection with Ottilia the claim may be urged against Meredith that he sometimes creates more or less unnatural events to precipitate action which his characters should take as a result of their own natures. The dramatic scene in which Richmond Roy sets fire to the curtains is too fortuitous to contribute as much as it does to the separation of Ottilia and Harry. He never summoned up courage to write to the Princess; the pen fell from his hand when he remembered the tragi-comic conclusion of their last interview.

Janet Ilchester's practical ideas and schemes contrast well with Ottilia's sentimental idealization of Harry. She is the girl long ago chosen by Harry's grandfather to be his wife. Of her he says: "She did not raise a spark of poetical sentiment in my bosom. She had grown a tall young woman, firmly built, light of motion, graceful perhaps; but it was not the grace of grace; the grace of simplicity, rather.....Upon what could she possibly reflect? She had not a care, she had no education, she could hardly boast an idea--two at a time I was sure she had never entertained. The sort of a wife for a fox-hunting lord, I summed up, and hoped he would be a good fellow."\*

\* The Adventures of Harry Richmond P. 329.





Janet's plans to marry Harry do her no credit. She selfishly hopes to separate him from Ottilia, and fails to see him as he is, but foolishly marries him in the end, after his love for her has been stimulated by her prospects as an heiress. Enough has been said. Janet's is the least significant character in the gallery of Meredith's women.

"Beauchamp's Career" was, perhaps, Meredith's favorite among his own works. He told Mr. Clodd: "Sometimes I favor Harry Richmond, but I am inclined to give the palm to 'Beauchamp's Career'. There is a breezy human interest about it, and the plot has a consistency and logical evolution which 'Feverel' lacks. Then, a thing that weighs with me, the French critics liked it; they said that Renee is true to life.\*

Twenty years after writing the book he said to Marcel Schwob of Renee: "Was she not a sweet girl? I think I am a little in love with her yet."\*

So Renee certainly was real to her creator as she has been to those who have read of her. She is a French woman whom the French themselves do not hesitate to accept. Mr. Priestly describes her well when he calls her "a creature of sweet imperiousness and delicate fire; as French as Clara Middleton is English".\*\*

Nevil Beauchamp meets Renee in Venice. She is described thus: "A brunette of the fine lineaments of the

\* S. M. Ellis--"George Meredith: His Life and Friends in Relation to His Works" P. 261.

\*\* J. B. Priestly--"George Meredith". P. 184.





good blood of France, she chattered sketches of Venetian caught from the gondoliers, she was like a delicate cup of crystal brimming with the beauty of the place, and making one of them drink in all his impressions through her. Her features had the soft irregularities which run to rarities of beauty, as the ripple rocks the light; mouth, eyes, brows, nostrils, and bloomy cheeks played into one another liquidly; thought flew, tongue followed and the flash of meaning quivered over them like night lightning. Or oftener, to speak truth, tongue flew, thought followed; her age was but newly seventeen, and she was French."\*

Renee is chosen to marry an older Frenchman by her father. Nevil does what he can to combat this idea; he lacks the support of both Renee and her brother. Renee is controlled by fear, and cannot bring herself to the point of allowing her heart to guide her actions. This is the conventional attitude of the young French girl of good breeding. The brother Roland says: "Our girls are chess-pieces until they are married. Then they have life and character, sometimes too much."\*\* The youthful Renee then typifies womanhood bound by convention and content to remain so, however much she charms and entices mankind from the counsels of his intellect.

Later we find her equally entrancing as a mature married

\* "Beauchamp's Career" P. 41.

\*\* "Beauchamp's Career" P. 55.





woman making a first desperate snatch. Who can say that Renee is not a living figure?

We find Cecilia Halkett and equally lovable and vivid character, although her pride of class and wealth keep her from Nevil until it is too late. But in this very trait of her character lies the value of Cecilia as a personage of fiction. The dialogues on political matters which she has with Nevil are gems in that they show how her heart is always with Nevil, while her brain rejects what are to her his foolish and dangerous theories. The tragedy of the story is not so much in Nevil's death, which has a certain artificiality as if Meredith wished to get rid of his hero; it lies precisely in the mismatings that occur. Renee to the choice of her father; Cecilia to a staunch Tory instead of to Nevil; Nevil to Jenny Denham because he thinks her a Radical and is grateful to her. Nevil and Cecilia were well-suited to each other but how often in life does marriage take place on that basis? This series of mesalliances is typical of Meredith and illustrates forcibly his main preoccupation. "Here," says E. J. Bailey, "he is a realist in the strongest sense of the term; and his problem is the presentation of man and woman in the making, of man and woman struggling, albeit with many reverses, toward that perfection of soul which Meredith himself believes is the purpose and secret of this world's existence."\*

\* E. J. Bailey--"George Meredith" P. 56





Although Jenny Denham plays an important part in the tale, she plays it like a shadow. We know that Jenny is good, simple, intelligent; but we know it through the praise of others. Let the reader put down the book and ask himself what direct revelation he has of Jenny. He will certainly have a clear recollection of both Renee and Cecilia, but surely Jenny will remain dimly in the background of his mind,--like a character in a play who is often spoken of and even described, but who never appears on the stage.

Next for consideration come the two young ladies of "The Egoist", published in 1879, and unquestionably Meredith's greatest novel. They are Clara Middleton, the "dainty rogue in porcelain" and Laetitia Dale. Clara is an intelligent and practical young woman with a sense of humor. Physically she is enchanting. Meredith makes Clara live in our memories by vivid phrase and sensitive characterization. "Today the art (of dressing) was ravishingly companionable with her sweet lighted face; too vividly meaningful for pretty, if not of the strict severity for beautiful."\* Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson is responsible for the phrase "dainty rogue in porcelain";\*\* the author reinforces that opinion with "the look of the nymph that has gazed too long at the faun, and has unwittingly copied his lurking lip and long sliding eye".\*\*\*

\* "The Egoist" P. 169

\*\* "The Egoist" P. 41

\*\*\* "The Egoist" P. 88





The reader cannot go far without discovering that this is meant to convey Clara's delicious sense of humor--the very sense that detects Willoughby's colossal conceit and combats it. Humor rightly thought of is the true estimation of proportions; nothing but humor can penetrate effectively the magnificent stiffness of Sir Willoughby. Poor waiting Letty Dale can never summon up that bubbling art which Clara knows, and hence never quite sees Sir Willoughby as he really is. This implies nothing light in the character of Clara; she suffers torments of indecision in her efforts to escape her Egoist. She is torn between her horror at the thought of wedding Willoughby and her distress at breaking a pledge, at troubling her father, and dragging him away from Willoughby's library and wine-cellar. But she is capable of quick recovery; Laetitia is scandalized by the changed aspect of one who, so shortly before, appeared to be overwhelmed with despair. "Clara bathed in mirth; a boy in a summer stream shows not heartier refreshment of his whole being."\*

Clara was swept off her feet by Willoughby's early wooing; she soon finds him not to be the man she had known when she accepted him. But, as Meredith says: "She was compelled by her nature to hope, expect, and believe that Sir Willoughby would again be the man..."\*\* From this indecision, from this failure to realize that the

\* "The Egoist" P. 174.

\*\* "The Egoist" P. 55.





later Willoughby is the true man and cannot change, spring all Clara's troubles. "Very singularly, to show her simple spirit at the time, she was unaware of any physical coldness to him; she knew of nothing but her mind at work, objecting to this and that, desiring changes."\*

Almost equally interesting as the situation between Clara and her lover is the effect it produces on Willoughby's cousin, Vernon Whitford. Vernon obviously avoids being alone with Clara; yet he subjects her at meal times to a penetrating gaze. His eyes have to Clara a look of "mingled brooding and apprehension". Clara's knowledge of her love for Vernon comes in the unforgettable orchard scene in which she finds him asleep beneath the wild cherry tree.

"She turned her face to share the load of virginal blossoms whiter than summer cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim color and seem like higher Alpine snows in noon sunlight, a flush of white. From deep to deeper heavens of white her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrowed. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: 'He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!'"\*\*

\* "The Egoist" P. 56.

\*\* "The Egoist" P. 113.



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Later in the story, before and following her attempted flight from Patterne Hall, Clara wavers and vacillates. Indeed only a fortunate accident puts her on the right track; the denouement is no product of her courage. And this is precisely what makes her live in our memories. Clara is so intensely human that we cannot forget her. Long after we may have forgotten the plot of "The Egoist", we remember the character of Clara Middleton just as we can never forget the nature of her lover. For one commentator at least she is the most vivid and satisfactory woman Meredith has given us.

It is only fair to show another side of the picture. S. M. Ellis does not subscribe to the general enthusiasm for Clara as Meredith's most perfect heroine. "If she be so", he writes, "it is a strange reflection on his other admirable and true female creations, such as Rosamund Culling, Nesta Radnor, Cecilia Halkett, Ottilia, Sandra Belloni, Chloe, and Deana. A selfish, wayward girl, moody and unreasonable, never knowing her own mind; an undutiful and disobedient daughter; deceitful and prevaricating; ungrateful even to Vernon Whitford when she dubs him a Triton ashore; she is always seeking her own mental and physical comfort, untruthful whenever occasion requires."\*

It is difficult to pass over this comment without

\* S. M. Ellis--"George Meredith--His Life and Friends in Relation to his Works" P. 261.





feeling that Mr. Ellis has sacrificed Clara to his theory that "the whole gallery of characterization in the book is a study of egoism".\* So far from being undutiful and disobedient, Clara hesitates to break a bond which is disgusting to her, not because she would like to be Lady Patterne but largely because she is a dutiful daughter to a luxury-loving, self-centered old father. Her very vacillation is due to her fear of hurting those who have been kind to her, the Misses Patterne and her lover himself. Mr. Ellis' criticism shows a lack of understanding which may perhaps be expected of a man who considers Dickens vastly superior to Meredith.

All this justification of Clara may be beside the point in proving her a real and consistent character, for there seems to be little question of idealization in her case. Even to Mr. Ellis she is no puppet.

Now let us consider briefly the character of Laetitia Dale. Meredith writes that Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson's saying of Laetitia: "Here she comes, with a romantic tale on her eyelashes", was a portrait of Laetitia. Perhaps nearly everything that needs to be said is revealed in the scene of Sir Willoughby's return from abroad. "Meeting Laetitia, he sprang to the ground and seized her hand. 'Laetitia Dale!' he said. He panted. 'Your name is sweet

\* S. M. Ellis--"George Meredith--His Life and Friends in Relation to his Works". P. 260.





English music!...And you are well?' The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go....Laetitia breathed faintly of her gladness."\* This presages a courtship which never comes off. Poor hungry Letty! "She would have rejected hope to keep patience nigh her; but surely it cannot always be winter! said her reasoning blood, and we must excuse her as best we can if she was assured by her restored warmth that Willoughby came in the order of the revolving seasons, marking a long winter past....At their next meeting she was 'Miss Dale'.\*\*

Laetitia is unmarried, decidedly faded. She has cared and let it be known that she has cared for a man who has flirted with her and rejected her. Clara Middleton, a younger and brighter rival appears, yet Meredith does not after the fashion of Fielding or Dickens, allow Laetitia to appear ridiculous. She explains her position to Clara. "Ten years back, I thought of conquering the world with a pen. The result is that I am glad of a fireside, and not sure of always having one, and that is my achievement. Last year's sheddings from the tree do not form an attractive garland. Their merit is that they have not the same ambition. I am like them."\*\*\* The attitude of Clara and Letty may be unusual in that they both love the same man and yet are

\* "The Egoist" P. 25.

\*\* "The Egoist" P. 26.

\*\*\* "The Egoist" P. 158.





loyal and just to each other, yet their friendship follows so naturally from their characters that there is no strain. Another tribute to Meredith's art and another testimony to a happy union of idealism and realism. Still we may find in the last scenes between Laetitia and Sir Willoughby, when he asks for her hand, a definite unreality such as is found in similar scenes in Dickens. The Laetitia of the early chapters, despite the universal admiration of her intelligence, would never quite penetrate the Egoist, nor having done so would she be able to deal with him so harshly. The supposition is of course that her eyes were opened by her observation of Willoughby over a long period of time supplemented by her own experiences with him. But does such a person as Laetitia ever awaken as thoroughly as she did? Yet all in all Laetitia lives.

It is often complained that Meredith's characters speak in a high-flown and stilted manner and that their commonest speech crackles with epigrams. If this is so in general, it is particularly true of "The Egoist" which is written in part with a cold brilliance. But again we have to remember that Meredith was a Victorian and reflects inevitably the manners of his age. Such gems of wisdom and expression are not realistic in the mouths of all his characters, but he would indeed be a superficial reader who could not see certain of Meredith's people





glow under the enamel of metaphorical and extravagant speech. It must be admitted that there is, especially in "The Egoist", a certain jerky terseness and metaphorical abandon in the conversation which grows irritating and perhaps detracts from the story. Anyone interested in this should read the caricature of "The Egoist" written by Max Beerbohm in the Saturday Review, Christmas number, 1896.

In "The Tragic Comedians" Meredith reverses his usual formula. Customarily he gives us the story of a woman who is the victim (with the connivance of society) of some man's egotism. And it is not possible to deny that Meredith is in love with heroines and despises their lovers. But in "The Tragic Comedians" his affection is for Alvan and Alvan alone. That the story is that of Ferdinand Lassalle and Helene von Doenniges is well-known; we are not concerned with this feature of the novel and need go no further into it.

Clotilde von Ruediger is a member of the smaller German aristocracy which despises Sigismund Alvan as a demagogue and a Jew. Clotilde is famed for her originality and her brilliance. Meredith's treatment of Clotilde is prejudiced. It is his purpose to show her strong when with Alvan and weak when alone; but when he treats her in the scenes when she is not with Alvan, he goes in for an excessive analysis of her motives. Just as





Dacier in "Diana of the Crossways" is required to recognize the divinity of Diana's passion that he may excuse her offense, so Clotilde, bewildered at the inconsistency of her lover, is expected to suddenly develop powers which she cannot possess and which Alvan knows she cannot possess.

It is worth while here to examine what Mr. James Huneker had to say about Clotilde:

"Meredith depicts Clotilde as 'the imperishable type of human cowardice' to which he says all women are trained. This may be true of the characters in the book, not of Helena. Young women who are imprisoned and stuffed with lies about their lover are not cowardly if they weaken, especially after the shocking experience Helena had undergone with Lassalle. She had, brave as she was, put all to the test and lost. Is it any wonder that her nerves played her false when the man, as she thought, had deserted her? At least she cannot be compared with the lady in Browning's "Statue and the Bust". Helena greatly dared.

"And behind all this really tragic romance (not a tragic comedy) was something the English novelist forgot--the mating of a young man with a young woman; which is, whether we subscribe to Schopenhauer's view or not, the most significant fact in the life of our planet. The world was well lost for love by Lassalle; for Helena von Doeniges nothing remained but the mastication of Dead Sea fruit. When we understand we sympathize."\*

\* "A Half-Forgotten Romance", James Huneker  
New York Bookman Oct., 1907.





We may find some justice in this claim, but we feel that Hunecker has taken the lesser view of Clotilde as Meredith gives it, and has neglected the larger aspect. Surely the lasting impression we get of Clotilde is one of a strong, passionate woman, capable of great love and sacrifice. Meredith willy-nilly makes us feel with Clotilde even while he condemns her. But to the charge of not being sympathetic on occasion we may subscribe. There are incidents in the life of Meredith which show him unsympathetic and callous to what seem the crying needs of fellow-beings in extreme distress; but that side of the question can wait until later. Clotilde is a self-deceiver and a coquette by nature; Meredith has no patience with her on the first count, and could never forgive coquetry. She seems to be the only woman in his novels who is guilty of this primitive vice; and she certainly pays the price.

Five years more pass before another novel appears. Then comes "Diana of the Crossways" which is the first of a series of four novels all of which deal with the unhappy marriage in some form, and attack the conventional ideas on separation or divorce. Meredith admires and champions the women who suffer from unjust laws and customs, but when we detect unreality it seems not so much the product of the characters themselves as one of incident and plot construction. This is especially true of "Diana of the Crossways" which was published in 1884.



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Diana Warwick is perhaps next to Clara Middleton the most famous of Meredith's heroines. At the opening Diana is nineteen,--beautiful, brilliant, and with a great reputation for wit inherited from her Irish father. We see her first at the Dublin ball; the old general says of her: "She makes everything in the room dust around a blazing jewel."\* After the ball Diana makes a round of visits. Her friend, Lady Dunstane, is apprised by letter that Diana's beauty is causing her to be persecuted by unwelcome attentions. Of this Meredith writes:

"'How brutal men can be!' was one of Diana's incidental remarks, in a subsequent letter, relating simply to masculine habits. In those days the famous ancestral plea of the 'passion for his charmer' had not been altogether socially quashed down among the provinces, where the bottle maintained a sort of sway, and beauty which inflamed the sons of men was held to be in coy expectation of violent effects upon their boiling blood. There were, one hears that there still are, remnants of the primitive male, who, if resisted in their suing, conclude that they are scorned, and it infuriates them; some also whose 'passion for the charmer' is an instinct to pull down the standard of the sex, by a bully imposition of sheer physical ascendancy, whenever they see it flying with an air of gallant independence; and some who dedicate their lives to a study of the arts of the Lord of Reptiles, until they have worked





the crisis for a display of him in person. Assault or siege, they have achieved their triumphs; they have dominated a frailer system of nerves, and a young woman without father, or brother, or husband, to defend her, is cryingly a weak one, therefore inviting to such an order of heroes."\*

This biting paragraph is worth quoting at length for the light it sheds on Meredith's views of woman's position. The answer is fairly obvious and Meredith gives it elsewhere; not so much an education or elevation of the male, or a system of duello making woman the subject of a manly sport, but the education of woman herself to meet these situations and combat them on their own merits. Was this the cause that certain persons with raised eyebrows barred Meredith from Mudie's Library?

Without warning Diana rushes into a loveless marriage with Mr. Warwick presumably to escape the unwelcome attentions. Meredith gives us Mr. Warwick through his wife's eyes:

"Her humor soon began to play round the fortunate man, who did not seem, to the reader's mind, to bear so well a sentimental clothing. His pride was in being very English on the Continent, and Diana's instances of his lofty appreciations of the garden of Art and Nature, and statuesque walk through it, would have been more amusing if her

\* "Diana of the Crossways" P. 42.





friend could have harmonized the idea of the couple."\*

Diana's name becomes coupled with that of the elderly Lord Dannisburgh. Her husband sues her for divorce but his case fails for lack of evidence. She leaves him. She takes to novel writing to augment her income and lives extravagantly on the proceeds from her success. The second novel is less successful and she becomes financially involved. She has become friendly with a rising young politician, Percy Dacier. She sells an important political secret confided to her by Dacier. There is a strong scene between them when she confesses having betrayed him for money.

"He said no more. In half a minute he was gone.

To her it was the plucking of life out of her breast."\*\*

The book closes with the marriage of Diana to the patient Redworth, a vastly superior counterpart of Thackeray's Dobbin of Vanity Fair.

We may find serious defects in this novel. Meredith, the great student of character, allows Diana to be saved from running away with Dacier by the purely fortuitous illness of her friend Lady Dunstane, and not through any strength of her own nature. Meredith gives us Diana as a woman of intellect, yet he allows her to return to Dacier with an assumption of superiority for which she can claim no credit. And the matter of the betrayal of the secret is

\* "Diana of the Crossways" P. 56.

\*\* "Diana of the Crossways" P. 314.





still more unconvincing. The author has striven throughout to show that Diana's powers and intellect are unusual, that uncongenial marriage restraints are intolerable where she is concerned. Yet in two scenes, set twenty-four hours apart, there are glaring discrepancies in Diana's statements. In the first she exclaims: "'And you were charged with the secret all the evening and betrayed not a sign! ....The proposal is? No more compromises!!' 'Total!!' Diana clapped hands; and her aspect of enthusiasm was intoxicating....'We two are a month in advance of all England....'"\* In the second scene she pleads: "'You did not name it as a secret. I did not imagine it to be a secret of immense, immediate importance.'"\*\* Now either Diana is an idiot or she proves beyond all doubt that the political basis of her intercourse with Dacier is a fraud. And on top of this Meredith has no sympathy for Dacier when he turns from Diana!

At the outset Meredith set out to show us Diana as conceived by Redworth: "Redworth believed in the soul of Diana. For him it burned, and it was a celestial radiance about her, unquenched by her shifting fortunes, her wilfulness, and, it might be, errors. She was a woman and weak; that is, not trained for strength. She was soul; therefore perpetually pointing to growth in

\* "Diana of the Crossways" P. 292.

\*\* "Diana of the Crossways" P. 311.





purification."\* It is sure that Meredith based the story on the gossip concerning the granddaughter of Sheridan; it seems that he wished to use the story but apply it to a conception of character such as is given above. But the two did not fit. The story remains but not the character of Diana. We may love Diana with our hearts but not our heads. She is in the larger sense an unhappy union of realism and idealism.

One of Our Conquerors is perhaps among the greatest of Meredith's novels but ~~it~~ is at the same time one of the most confused and tortuous. The heroine of it is Nataly; her daughter Nesta shares with her that honor. The story is a most subtle study of social forces and how they wreck the man who would at once ignore them and have them on his side. Nataly and Victor Radnor have formed an alliance although Victor is bound by a marriage from which his wife will not release him. Nesta is the fruit of this alliance. The key-note of the book is given by Nataly: "We are distracted, perverted, made strangers to ourselves by a false position." The Radnors "walk on a plank across chasms."

The description of Nataly's attitude to Victor is most successful. She will not permit herself to analyse him, because "...if we are women, who commonly allow the lead to men, getting it for themselves only by snaky cun-

\* "Diana of the Crossways" P. 338.





ning or desperate adventure, credulity--the continued trust in the man--is the alternative of despair."\* Meredith gives us a marvelous portrait of Nataly's natural beauty and nobility thwarted, prostrated, and twisted. She is to one reader, next to Clara, the most lovable of Meredith's women. Of her yielding to Victor we are told: "This might be likened to the detachment of a flower on the river's bank by swell of flood; she had no longer root of her own; away she sailed, through beautiful scenery, with occasionally a crashing fall, a turmoil, emergence from a vortex, and once more the sunny whirling surface."\*\*

This is perhaps Meredith's most successful "psychological" novel in its portrayal of Nataly; there is here more subtlety, less of the obvious than in "The Egoist", where after all the author bears on rather heavily. It is really very fine--that portion where Nataly suspects her daughter of not discriminating between herself and such women as Mrs. Marsett.

Very indicative of the character of Nataly is her musing in the chapter called "Nataly in Action".

"She had given him her life, little aid. She might have closely counselled, <sup>women</sup> would in and out with his ideas. Sensible of capacity, she confessed to having been morally

\* "One of Our Conquerors" P. 45.

\*\* "One of Our Conquerors" P. 41.





subdued, physically as well; swept onward; and she was arrested now by an accident, like a waif of the river-floods by the dip of a branch. Time that it should be! But was not Mr. Durance, inveighing against the favoured system for the education of women, right when he declared them to be unfitted to speak an opinion on any matter external to the household or in a crisis of the household? She has not agreed with him; he presented stinging sentences, which irritated more than they enlightened. Now it seemed to her, that the model women or men make pleasant slaves, not true mates; they lack the worldly training to exotic fostering of the senses for women, not the strengthening breath of vital common air. If good fortune is with them, all may go well; the stake of their fates is upon the perpetual smooth flow of good fortune. She had never joined to the cry of the women. Few among them were having it in the breast as loudly."\*

When we come to Nesta there is much that is beautiful, but she is less perfectly drawn than her mother. She is portrayed as smiling, singing, courageously upright, the "~~Blue~~ butterfly". But the Marsett episode is somewhat over mawkish, since it causes her to champion henceforth all women under a social cloud; both the actually fallen and those likely to fall. We might prefer the earlier, light-hearted, carolling Nesta.

But what could be finer than the closing scene in Mrs.

\* "One of Our Conquerors" P. 248.





Burman's house with its blue satin curtains, its gilt chairs, its Louis Quatorze clock, with the hostess dying. How wonderfully is revealed the malevolent specter which has hung over Nataly and Victor!

Lord Ormont and his Aminta is simpler in style than One of Our Conquerors, but is akin to it in theme. The story of Lord Ormont is based on the history of the Earl of Peterborough who was famous as a soldier at Valencia but was recalled for high-handed acts. He married privately the well-known singer, Anastasia Robinson, but would not acknowledge her as his wife publicly until shortly before his death which was many years after his marriage.

Aminta Farrell is first seen by the boys of the school where the scene opens. Aminta and Weyburn are attracted to each other in a school-boy-school-girl fashion, but nothing comes of it. Later Weyburn goes as secretary to Lord Ormont and meets Aminta again,--this time as the unrecognized wife of Lord Ormont. Aminta here is very gracefully drawn. Excellent is her bewilderment and variance of feeling, in the dangerous passion offered her by Morsfield contrasted to her sweet, sunny love for Weyburn. Never were two lovers at once more passionate and honorable. There is a subtle contest between feeling and convention which Meredith loved. It is characteristic of Meredith that the lovers, after all their self-denial, should come together by fortuitous circumstance. And it's a regrettable characteristic as we found in Diana. Surely





the situation is artificial enough! The lovers have finally parted. "Matey" Weyburn is going to Switzerland to found an international school and he is standing on the deck of a vessel outward bound when he sees Aminta bathing! The urge is too strong; he dives in and pursues her. The dialogue between them is poetic but likewise very realistic.

"What sea-nymph sang me thy name?"

She smote a pang of her ecstasy into him: "Ask mine!"

"Brownny!"

They swam; neither of them panted; their heads were water-flowers that spoke at ease.

"We've run from school; we won't go back."

"We've a kingdom."

"Here's a big wave going to be a wall."

"Off he rolls."

"He's like the big Brent broad meadow under Elling Wood."

"Don't let Miss Vincent hear you."\*

This decides: Aminta leaves Lord Ormont and joins her "Matey" in his school, while Lord Ormont shows his good sportsmanship by sending one of his grand-nephews to their school! This has been thought so extravagant and false by some that Meredith was accused of deliberately laying a trap for his critics.





Aminta's love and admiration of a man like Lord Ormont were natural enough in a young woman. Even Weyburn himself had worshipped this man as a hero, and the hero had stooped to make her his wife. Being his wife, her pride forced her to insist upon his acknowledgement of her until there was constant strife between them on this subject. Aminta is very human; she finds at last that she has neither love which she craves nor a title which might have its compensations. A hardened critic has said that Aminta would have had no grounds for a divorce in Sioux City.\* This is probably true, but she married in youth through ignorance and a false conception of love. She deserved another chance, and she made a far wiser second choice, which was to be expected. There is certainly little about her which is unusual. Her courage to face the consequences of her act is admirable--but she had little to lose and everything to gain.

There are grave inconsistencies in the book and with these the character of Aminta must suffer. It is not probable that Aminta would have gone on putting up with Mrs. Pagnell's vulgarity. And most important of all, how did Aminta and Weyburn propose to rear an international school when they themselves were unmarried to each other? Only by deception could they hope to gain many pupils, and if they practiced deception what was to become of their high ideals and their theories of education?

\* W. L. Phelps, "The Advance of the English Novel" P. 176.





Many critics consider The Amazing Marriage to be the most living and vital of Meredith's novels. Mr. Le Gallienne tells briefly the story in such adequate form that we can hardly do better than to quote him.

"A cynical overbearing eccentric lord proposes impulsively, during a dance at Baden, to one of the superbest young women Mr. Meredith has created, and then, hoping she may forget all about it disappears to one of his English estates. But an old kinsman of Carinthia--who herself is a wild Diana-like creature, innocent of the most elementary matrimonial wile--sees that Lord Fleetwood keeps to his promise. Fleetwood keeps it grimly indeed--just keeps it, neither more nor less. He drives his bride from the church in a four-in-hand with a devilish recklessness<sup>with</sup> which he means to frighten her, hardly throwing her a word the while; and the first entertainment he offers her is a prize-fight. In short, he behaves to her with that studied brutality for which no one can match an English aristocrat, and the various developments resulting provide one of those themes of tragi-comedy in which Mr. Meredith is so at home. In the main, however, I find the book less interesting for its drama than for its descriptive force or its psychology, its picture of Carinthia, its nature pictures, unmatched even by Mr. Meredith himself, its store of brilliant aphorism, and its general atmosphere of stage-coach England. Carinthia is one of





Mr. Meredith's most fascinating heroines, and as she entered the gallery of beautiful women already created by his hand there must have been no small flutter of jealousy; Clara Middleton and Diana must have felt an unexpected insecurity of supremacy."\*

Carinthia is physically characterized in several revealing phrases: "A haggard Venus", "A look of beaten flame", "Something more than breeding" stamped on her features. "Chillon, she was magical, you cannot ever have seen her irradiated with happiness! Her pleasure in the happiness of all around her was part of the charm. One should be a poet to describe her. It would task an artist to paint the rose-crystal she became when threading her way through the groups to be presented. This is not meant to say that she looked beautiful. It was the something above beauty, more unique and impressive, like the Alpine snow-cloak towering up from the flowery slopes you know so well and I a little."\*\*

There is something of grandeur in Carinthia's silent acceptance of Fleetwood's silence from the night of the Ball to the day of the wedding. In Carinthia a passionate love lends single-mindedness and courage; there can be no reckoning of costs. It is part of Carinthia's greatness that she moves through her role step by step and

\* Richard Le Gallienne, "George Meredith: Some Characteristics" P. 96

\*\* The Amazing Marriage P. 158.





unwillingly. Her qualities are stable and independent of circumstance (in this how much more surely drawn than Diana).

The story is of the growth of love in Fleetwood and the corresponding death of it in Carinthia. The following scene between them is well worthy of quotation since it reveals so much of Carinthia's character:

"The dwarf tower of Croridge village church fronted them against the sky, seen by both." "You remember it," he said. And she answered, "I was married there." "You have not forgotten that injury, Carinthia?" "I am a Mother." "By all the saints, you hit hard! Justly. Not you. Our deeds are the hard hitters. We learn when they begin to flage late, stroke upon stroke! Suppose we hold a costly thing in the hand and dash it to the ground--no recovering of it, none! That must be what your father meant. I can't regret you are a mother. We have a son, a bond. How can I describe the man I was!" he muttered, "possessed! sort of werewolf! You are my wife?" "I was married to you, my lord. "It's a tie of a kind." "It binds me." "Obey," you said. "Obey it, I do". "You consider it holy?" "My father and mother spoke to me of the marriage tie. I read the service before I stood at the altar. It is holy. It is dreadful. I will be true to it." "To your husband? ~~To~~ his name, to his honor? To the vow to live with him?" "My husband broke that for me." Carinthia, if he bids you, begs you to renew it? God knows what you may save me from." "Pray to God. Do





not beg of me, my lord. I have my brother and my little son. No more of husband for me! God has given me a friend, too, a man of humble heart, my brother's friend, my dear Rebecca's husband. He <sup>who</sup> can take them from me? no one but God. See the splendid sky we have!" With those words she barred the gates on him; at the same time she bestowed the frank look of an amiable face brilliant in the lively red of her exercise, in its bent-bow curve along the forehead, out of the line of beauty, touching, as her voice was, to make an undertone of anguish swell an ecstasy. So he felt it, for his mood was now the lover's. A torture smote him, to find himself transported by that voice at his ear to the scene of the young bride in thirtyacre meadow."\*

We may find in The Amazing Marriage much that is improbable. The birth of a child to Carinthia under the circumstances of her marriage is almost fantastic. Meredith himself admitted that the story should be called The Amazing Baby. But when the improbabilities and absurdities are put aside we have a moving tale. The character of Carinthia is unusual, she is perhaps a little too great for this earth, but she is nevertheless plausible.

No study of this kind would be complete without examining the marital experiences of the author himself to see if we may discover what influences these experiences may have had on his writings.

\* The Amazing Marriage P. 554.





We know that shortly after the departure of Meredith's father for South Africa in 1849, George made what Priestly calls his amazing marriage. Among his friends at that time was Edward Peacock, son of the famous Thomas Love Peacock, novelist and poet. The two men became fast friends and were soon joined in their walks by Edward's sister, Mary Ellen Nicholls, the widow of a naval officer, and a witty and handsome woman of thirty. Meredith was then only twenty-one. Soon the young poet was in love, and overlooking the seniority, and his own lack of means, proposed to her. It is said that she refused him six times but was finally overcome by his impetuosity. For some time they lived abroad and then went to live with Thomas Love Peacock. Both husband and wife wrote/ at least once in collaboration when they produced a work on the art of cookery. In 1853 their son, Arthur Gryffydd, was born; there had been several children before this who had died in infancy. Peacock found that a baby and a quarrelsome couple were too much for his comfortable declining years and so the young people moved out leaving the older man in peace. The marriage was doomed from the outset. The fault lay more in the similarity in temperament than in difference in age. Both were brilliant, ambitious, high-strung, and bitter-tongued. What would naturally have led to trouble in any case was aggravated by a dreary procession of bills, lodgings, dead babies, and thwarted literary ambitions. There were fre-





quent quarrels, separations, and reconciliations, until at last Mrs. Meredith left England with an artist named Wallis. The son remained with the father. In 1859 Mrs. Meredith returned, a sick and sorrowful woman, aching for her child. She lived in various lodgings until her death in 1861. Meredith did not visit her in her last illness, nor did he attend the funeral. He does not appear too well in this affair. He showed himself cold and relentless in the face of suffering that completely eclipsed his own injuries. His pride forbade him to make the generous gesture. He was always reticent on the subject of this tragic marriage, merely saying, "No sun warmed my roof-tree; the marriage was a blunder; she was ten years my senior."

We might have expected Meredith to become a misogynist, attacking women, but at least as a writer he took a very different attitude. Certainly in his novels, with the exception of "The Tragic Comedians", he never missed an opportunity to defend a woman, and the arrows of his wit were directed at the egotistical male.

In 1863 Meredith, then at the age of thirty-five, met in England a family of Huguenot extraction, the Vulliamys. This family consisted of the father and three daughters, and with the younger of these daughters, Marie, a girl of twenty-four, Meredith fell in love. The affection was returned and the marriage took place in 1864. This marriage was happy as the first was wretched. In 1885 Mrs. Meredith died, and her husband evinced his





grief by "A Faith on Trial", "Change in Recurrence", and other poems of this period.

What can we say of the effect of these two marriages upon the novels? The first was made in 1849 and ended in the death of Peacock's daughter in 1861. In this period were written the early poems, "The Saving of Shagpat", "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" and "Evan Harrington". Surely none of these works is typical of the Meredithian view of women as expressed later. "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" is mainly preoccupied with the relation of father to son, a theme taken from Meredith's own life. "Evan Harrington" is largely autobiographical. In other words the main content of Meredith's work during the period of his unhappy marriage was not concerned with those championings of woman which occupied his later works. Beginning with "Sandra Belloni" in 1864, the date of his happy marriage, we find the main effort of the novelist to expose the relationship of men and women to the disparagement of the former and to the credit of the latter. If we can conclude anything from this, it is that Meredith's mind was not absorbed with these problems in the earlier days, but that his intensely happy marriage in 1864 quickened his great sympathy for women and stimulated the great flow of feminist novels. It is certainly strange that Meredith who surely thought deeply of these matters from an early age, was not moved by his tragic first marriage to write a novel in which Woman as he knew her would



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receive hard usage at his hands. It is true that he traced the course of his whole first marriage in the poem "Modern Love", written soon after his wife's death, which may have served as an outlet for his feelings toward the tragedy. It is certain that he was bitter toward the sex for a time. The only traces of this feeling in his novels of that time, however, are from "Richard Feverel" and "Rhoda Fleming". In chapter xxii of "Richard Feverel" woman is compared to the vegetable creation, and in another passage (subsequently suppressed) to a wild-cat. In "Rhoda Fleming", chapter xxviii, Edward Blancove inveighs against the animal vagaries of the sex.\* So it would seem that his tenderness was awakened or at least stimulated to action by the felicitous union with Miss Vulliamy. Perhaps his harsh treatment of Clotilde was a throw-back to those early days when the Epicurean Peacock was diverted from his poetry and his Greek by the temperamental encounters of his daughter and his son-in-law. It is evident at any rate that Meredith had the background for a realistic view of women.

Now let us view more generally the great Victorian author's treatment of his feminine characters.

Meredith approaches all matters through the Comic Spirit. He remarks that in the East there is laughter but no comedy, for "where the veil is over woman's faces, you cannot have society, without which the senses are

\* S. M. Ellis, "George Meredith: His Life and Friends in Relation to His Work" P. 93.





barbarous and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst."\* The more freely Woman moves among men the greater the scope for comedy. To quote him again: "I am not quoting the Arab to exhort and disturb the somnolent East; rather for cultivated women to recognize that the Comic Muse is one of their best friends. They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists. Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see where they have no social freedom, Comedy is absent; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place and a sentimental version of them. Yet the Comic will out, as they would know if they listened~~X~~ to some of the private conversations of men whose minds are undirected by the Comic Muse; as the sentimental man to his astonishment would know likewise, if he in a similar fashion could receive a lesson. But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty-in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilization-there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions."\*\*

\* Essay on Comedy P. 118

\*\* Essay on Comedy P. 118





Woman, Meredith believes, is the ally of the Comic Spirit because she has that sweet common sense that sustains comedy. She is nearer the earth, and her function is to see that man is nourishingly rooted there and not left to famish in the mid-air of his dreams. Woman needs the freedom of expression and must be liberated from the sentimental image of her set up by egotistical males. Meredith suffered, of course, from the prudery of his age, but his position is plain to read. He sees Woman as an individual, the mate of Man, and once she is no longer regarded as a chattel, the sensualist's ripe fruit, the values about her are likely to change.

Meredith's heroines, then, have a double function in the novels. Whereas, earlier novelists presented their heroines very clearly in the physical sense, but often left their characters vague, Meredith tends to define the characters and motives of his women with great care, and makes the appearance of the ladies secondary.

It is interesting to read what a foreign observer has to say about the heroines of Meredith. Henriette Cordolet in her Essay "La Femme dans L'Oeuvre de Meredith"\*

"Il a étudié la femme avec une attention, une perspicacité, une profondeur qui font de lui l'un de ses plus grandes peintres. Ses femmes sont la vie et le charme même, toutes ont une personnalité très distincte, mais dans toutes on retrouve la femme."

\* Revue Germanique March-April 1906 "La Femme dans L'Oeuvre de Meredith" Henriette Cordelat.





The point that each heroine does seem to have a distinct personality, that we remember each one for certain traits which mark her as an individual, is important. Thus, we cannot say that women are idealized by Meredith in the sense that he has created a glorified type, all of whom are marked with the same brand of impossible virtues.

It must then be our conclusion that Meredith is a realistic portrayer of women. We have noted certain inconsistencies in his characterizations; certain of his women are vaguely or conventionally drawn, some of them are strained by the exigencies of the plot or by Meredith's partiality for epigram; but taken in the large his heroines are living creatures, and the most enchanting ladies that fiction can show us.



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